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## High-Tech Employees In Demand

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TAMPA - -- Tampa's high-tech job market is growing faster than local workers can fill it, according to a survey conducted by the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce.

As the chamber prepares its first community report card in years, certain trends already have emerged. The availability of qualified workers was cited as the most significant problem for businesses looking to expand.

Of the first 100 companies that responded to the survey, more than 60 percent ranked the area's availability of qualified workers as average or below average. About 58 percent of the respondents rated the quality of the work force as average or below average.

Amber Scruggs, human resources director for Titan Corp., said she has about a 50 percent success rate in finding local applicants to fill technical positions in the Tampa area for the defense contractor.

"Senior-level software engineers are hard to find," said Scruggs, who is based at Titan's offices in Reston, Va. "It's definitely harder to fill the jobs in Tampa than it is here in D.C. You can't go anywhere in D.C. without stumbling into someone who has the skills to match your job."

Jeni Atwell, a senior technical recruiter for Strategic Staffing Solutions, said Tampa has seen enormous growth in the high-tech sector over the past five years. The number of qualified workers hasn't kept pace. Her company recruits information technology professionals for AT&T, TECO, Citigroup and JP Morgan Chase.

"I've had to recruit outside of Tampa Bay. I can't seem to find people locally," Atwell said.

The cost to recruit and hire a person from out of state can be enormous.

"We lose money by having to look outside of the city," Atwell said. "These days, people want full relocation expenses. They want the company to pay for their lodging and for them to go home on the weekends and, of course, moving expenses."

Atwell's clients can afford to absorb those charges, but many smaller businesses in the Tampa area cannot.

MediaLab, which relocated to Tampa from Detroit in 2000, couldn't fill its positions quickly enough. The 10-year-old company produces two- and three-dimensional graphics primarily for the home-building industry. But as the business near the Interstate 75/Fletcher Avenue interchange grew to nearly 80 employees, human

resources director Sharon LeSturgeon struggled to find applicants with training in graphic design and computer animation for entry-level positions.

"The kind of students we needed, we weren't finding at the" University of South Florida, company President Mike Lozicki said. "We were hiring from out of state. We even brought someone in from Russia. But anytime you bring someone here that doesn't have any ties to the community, the likelihood is less that they'll stay."

Lozicki said he began to question the move. He thought the talent pool had dried up, and he expressed those frustrations when he filled out his chamber survey.

"It was limiting us from being able to grow," he said. "We thought we were going to have to develop our own training program just to be able to fill positions."

Earlier this year, the Committee of 100, the chamber's economic development arm, launched a yearlong project aimed at growing existing businesses in Hillsborough County. Project manager Donna Harak didn't waste any time responding to Lozicki's issues.

She immediately introduced him to Emerge Tampa, the chamber's under-35 networking group, which gave the company's young employees an opportunity to get involved in the community. Harak also connected Lozicki and LeSturgeon to the career placement counselors at the International Academy of Design & Technology in Tampa.

"After the initial meeting, we invited MediaLab to come tour our campus and look at our curriculum," career placement director Amy Boyer said. "I think we both saw what a good match it was."

Within three months, MediaLab had hired five IADT graduates and has five students interning at the company. Every student who completed an internship has been offered a job, Boyer said.

"We call them our 'farm team,' " Lozicki said. "Now, we're in a position where we're able to grow. We're four times the size we were when we got here."

The Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance got involved, helping MediaLab secure nearly \$80,000 in grants to help pay for employee training programs. The grants pay half of the employees' wages while they receive on-the-job technical training.

"We had no idea these things were available," Lozicki said. "I was floored at how quickly they were able to turn things around for us."

Dwight Stephens, a founder of Advanced C4 Solutions, a defense contractor in south Tampa, also learned about the training grants through Workforce Alliance.

Stephens said recruiting tech employees for a defense contractor is even trickier because civilians must acquire security clearance, which can take up to two years. So local contractors such as Advanced C4 Solutions and Titan rely heavily on former military personnel to fill jobs.

The 3-year-old company now has 54 employees and is doubling in size every year. Workforce Alliance helped the company secure \$46,000 for IT training in Microsoft and Cisco systems. The second grant provided \$35,000 for employees to take online classes from Villanova University in government contracting.

"There's no way I could have done it at this stage in the company," Stephens said.

LeStourgeon said the assistance from the chamber and Workforce Alliance has allowed MediaLab to continue its rapid expansion and hire a full-time recruiter. "It makes us feel far more loyal to the community because the community is giving back to us," she said.

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